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Complex reading is key to college success

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The ability to handle complex reading is the major factor separating high school students who are ready for college reading from those who are not, according to a new report.

The study by ACT, a nonprofit company that tests students, found that most states contribute to the lack of college preparedness by not requiring complex reading comprehension in high school. In fact, ACT found that most states don't have any standards at all for high school reading achievement.

"If you're not asking for it, you're not going to get it," said Cynthia Schmeiser, senior vice president for research and development at ACT, formerly known as American College Testing.

In complex reading passages, organization may be elaborate, messages may be implicit, interactions among ideas or characters may be subtle and the vocabulary is demanding and intricate.

The ACT isolated reading complexity as a critical factor by analyzing the results of the 1.2 million high school seniors in 2005 who took the well-known ACT college entrance test. Based on that test, only 51 percent of students showed they were ready to handle the reading requirements of a typical first-year college course.

The literacy of today's high school graduates has become an enormous concern for colleges and employers.

In the United States, reading is largely treated as an elementary school subject, with diminishing focus in later grades. But with each alarming report on college readiness, adolescent literacy is gaining attention.

On the federal test considered a report card for the country, the performance of 17-year-olds has essentially been stagnant for 20 years. Another recent study found that more than half of students at four-year colleges lack the literacy to handle complex, real-life tasks.

Richard Ferguson, the CEO of ACT, said his new study has data to show that complex reading is what makes a difference -- and that states don't require it.

"It's sort of an in-your-face statement about how far we have to go," Ferguson said.

ACT is calling for revised high school reading standards in core subjects, targeted help earlier in school for kids who struggle with reading, and more reading training for teachers. Such changes could be difficult.

At present, high school instructors are used to teaching subjects, not deeper reading skills, said Patricia Sullivan, director of state programs at the independent Center on Education Policy.

Parents must also be convinced that spending high school time on reading is essential, and states must come up with money to revise courses, Sullivan said.

Requiring rigorous reading will also take patience, because unless extra help gets to students before and during high school, more complexity could only mean lower test scores.

"With all the focus on reading, I think states are going to move in this direction," Sullivan added. "The question is when, and where the leadership will come from."

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